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### Mick Peter

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# Julia Wachtel

**Julia Wachtel: Post Culture**  
Vilma Gold, London  
16 March – 27 April

**Julia Wachtel emerged** at the same time as the Pictures Generation in 1980s New York, and her work shares a lot of the same concerns and strategies with regard to media appropriation and ironic juxtaposition – though with a slightly more oblique, cryptic twist. Astonishingly, though, this is her first solo show in the UK – and so takes the form of a miniature survey of works produced during different stages in her career.

Probably her best-known pieces internationally, however, are the large canvases onto which the artist paints oversize cartoon figures copied from chintzy greetings cards, alternating these with pictures sourced from news media. Superficially, then, there's a kind of contrast between the bright, buffoonish, absurdly caricatured emotions and the grayscale, ostensibly factual depictions – the point being that actually both sets of images are emblems of the same simplified and exaggerated mediascape. Yet if her technique sounds slightly formulaic, the results are often decidedly unnerving, richly ambiguous. *What, What, What* (1988) is a case in point, featuring one of those tacky, phallic homunculi you get on comedy erotic cards, together with an utterly bizarre newsprint image of a fur-coated woman wearing some kind of pale, rubbery mask. The combination clearly invites a reading to do with desire and concealment – yet the overall message is as much about the fundamental unknowability and obscurity of meaning. With their open, exclaiming mouths, the figures appear to be trying to communicate something – but all the specifics have been leeched away, as if the sound has been suddenly turned down.

The cinematic or televisual analogy is appropriate. Wachtel's longest-running series consists of sequences of commercial posters, which, read left-to-right, evoke celluloid strips or random channel-hopping. *Narrative Collapse II* (1981/2013), for instance, goes: schmaltzy anonymous flower-girl; Judy Garland in a gold lamé suit; Che Guevara; the same Garland image again; Davey Crockett; middle-aged Elvis. Superimposed on each sequence, additionally, is a portrait silhouette drawn in black marker pen, like a permanent shadow – the idea presumably

being that our sense of self is as much a projection, an artistic construct, as these larger-than-life pop-icons.

If these sorts of identity-based issues can sometimes seem a little jejune, Wachtel's *American Color* series from the 1990s onwards, combining monochrome canvases with silkscreened snippets of found imagery, is a more pertinent response to the massive proliferation of media technologies. In *I'm Ok, You're Ok* (1992), a freeze-frame from a daytime TV talk show drifts beyond the borders of an expanse of yellow, as if vertical hold has broken down; while by *ACv2.6* (2012), Wachtel's source material has shifted to the Internet, featuring some incomprehensible extreme sport sandwiched between uneven slabs of grey. In both works, the sense is of a loss of bearings – as if contemporary culture itself is simply scrolling away incoherently; as if all visual material has become completely atomised, hopelessly reduced to an indecipherable level of abstraction.

In which case, might not the logical endpoint, the ultimate abstraction, be total imagelessness? That's the sense, certainly, behind the show's most profoundly unsettling work: a brief sound piece from 1984, in which a sample of brokenhearted histrionics from a daytime soap is followed by a creepy, muffled, oddly beguiling voice uttering the looped phrase, "Come closer... you disappear me". A kind of sinister invocation of oblivion, then: a mantra for the mass media age.

**GABRIEL COXHEAD**

# Mick Peter

**Mick Peter: Trademark Horizon**  
SWG3, Glasgow  
16 March – 27 April

**The function of brand imagery** and logo design, we might assume, is to communicate the beneficial qualities of the product or brand as clearly, concisely and quickly as possible. Signification is intentional and ambiguity is avoided. So far, so semiotically uncomplicated – for design at least. On the other hand, as David Crow notes in his book *Visible Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics* (2007), contemporary

art offers 'many examples of work that deliberately seek to avoid what [Umberto] Eco calls "the laws of probability that govern common language"', going on to reiterate Eco's view that contemporary art 'draws its value from this deviation from common structures'. Is this really the case? If so, Mick Peter's exhibition wholly undermines some of the common (and for designers, infuriating) misconceptions around how art and design 'make meaning' in different ways.

Continuing his interest in the world of commercial art – as seen in last year's exhibition *Lying and Liars* at the Collective Gallery in Edinburgh – Peter has variously appropriated, translated, invented and adapted trademarks drawn from predigital eras of illustration. These form the catalyst for the five large sculptures in *Trademark Horizon*. The trademarks themselves, drawn from old *Graphis* annuals and other sources, are intriguing *because* of the abstract or idiosyncratic approach to the product or brand their designers aimed to encapsulate. Even before Peter's intervention, the downright eccentricity of these 'failed pictorial trademarks' suggests that the anchor had already begun to become unmoored. Working with these signs, Peter has increased the detachment of the logos from their commercial application, focusing instead on the almost fantastical design processes that seemingly underpin them. This is clear in works such as *Toot and Come In* (all works 2013), a large-scale jesmonite and polyurethane foam sculpture based on a supermarket logo that featured the head of a pharaoh. What links an ancient Egyptian king and a mid-twentieth-century grocery store? And what are *Thing Fish* (beyond the title's reference to Frank Zappa) and *Book-Keeper* selling? While the style here is midcentury modern, resembling the imagery of Robert Stewart's textile and ceramic design, it also emphasises Peter's interest in revisionist histories of art and design, the odd moments of madness or brilliance where art and design go completely off-kilter and veer into counterculture.

It is the apparent arbitrariness between form and function that lends humour and playfulness to both the original trademarks and logos, and to the artist's treatment of them as almost animate objects or puppets. Set on a stagelike blue ground that sometimes appears to float above the bare concrete floor of the larger gallery space, the sculptures could be read as strange, lifesize chessmen about to perform in some kind of object theatre, or as monumental props in Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967). It is this visual wit, verging on kitsch, which is perhaps Peter's own trademark and the success of this show.

**SUSANNAH THOMPSON**

**Julia Wachtel**  
*Narrative Collapse II*,  
 1981/2013, posters, marker, 102 x  
 415 cm. Courtesy Vilma Gold,  
 London



**Mick Peter**  
*Trademark Horizon*, 2013  
 (installation view). Courtesy the  
 artist and SWG3, Glasgow